WILDSTORM UNIVERSE

#6
Jan

Suggested
For Mature
Readers

steeper™

season two

ED BRUBAKER
SEAN PHILLIPS

Sean
2004

Wildstorm.com

This is how it begins...

Lynch's I.O. team starts taking Tao's people apart around three A.M.

Suddenly surrounding them in the midst of their task--

--The ASSASSINATION of a senior U.N. official, and his replacement with a SHAPE-SHIFTER.

Of course, they manage to arrive just AFTER the murder, which makes me wonder about Lynch's counter-plan...

...But otherwise, I find the I.O. Black Ops squads to be just as fast and lethal as the one I used to run.

Back in the days before my fall from grace.

WHAT THE FUCK IS *GOING ON,* HOLDEN?

GIVE ME THOSE...

Miss Misery isn't supposed to be here. She's not part of the PLAN.

Not Tao's plan.

Or even Lynch's plan.

JESUS...

No, tonight was just about me and the two of them, making their first moves...

...each hiding their REAL move behind a LIE.

GRETCHEN, STOP...

LET GO OF ME, GOD DAMN IT!

Because THAT'S how the game is PLAYED.

STOP.

THOSE MOTHER-FUCKERS JUST CUT OUR PEOPLE TO *PIECES* DOWN THERE, HOLDEN...

I KNOW.

After all these years, I've learned THAT MUCH, at least.

DON'T TELL ME YOU SUDDENLY *GIVE A SHIT* IF SOME OF OUR PEOPLE GET *KILLED?*

THAT'S *NOT* THE POINT.

THE POINT IS THE *LAW* IS KILLING OUR MEN AND WE'RE NOT DOING *ANYTHING* ABOUT IT.

AND THAT *REALLY* BUGS YOU?

I CAN *ALREADY* FEEL THE BILE IN MY THROAT, YOU BASTARD.

HOLDEN, YOU BETTER TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON HERE RIGHT *NOW...*

...OR I SWEAR TO GOD THE NEXT TIME WE FUCK I WILL *FIND A WAY* TO MAKE YOU FEEL PAIN.

And of course, that's what this is all about...isn't it? Finding a way to make me feel pain--or ANYTHING--again.

Four-Sided Triangle

But she doesn't know that...just like she doesn't know that Tao is sacrificing these men.

That he hand-picked each one to unknowingly go to their deaths...

...like Kamikaze pilots who thought they had a parachute.

--FIRST STEP IS THAT LYNCH WANTS SOME KIND OF ***SHOW OF FAITH.***

THAT'S ***CRAP.***

HE JUST WANTS TO SEE IF I'M ***WATCHING*** YOU, OR IF THIS WHOLE THING IS A ***SET-UP.***

THAT WAS ***MY*** THOUGHT, TOO.

SO...WHAT DOES THE OLD BASTARD ***WANT?***

SOME MISSION OF YOURS THAT I.O. CAN ***TAKE DOWN*** TO MAKE HIM LOOK GOOD WITH HIS NEW ***BOSSES.***

HE TOLD ME TO FIND SOMETHING BIG. AND SOMETHING THAT COMES EQUIPPED WITH A DECENT FALL GUY.

SO I HAVE SOMEONE OTHER THAN *YOU* TO BLAME WHEN IT ALL GOES *WRONG*?

EXACTLY.

AND HOW DOES HE EXPECT ME TO FIND THIS TRAITOR *OUT*?

HE'LL HAVE ONE OF I.O.'S *SATELLITES* WATCHING THE WHOLE THING GO DOWN.

FIGURES YOU'LL JUST TAP IN THROUGH THAT ONCE YOU NOTICE IT'S MONITORING YOUR ACTION.

AH, SMART.

HE DOESN'T UNDERESTIMATE YOU. AT LEAST NOT ANYMORE.

PREFERABLY SOMETHING WHERE WE WOULDN'T LOSE *TOO MANY* GOOD PEOPLE.

NOW, NOW, HOLDEN...YOU CAN'T BAIT A TRAP WITHOUT THE PROPER AMOUNT OF BLOODSHED.

AFTER ALL, WE WOULDN'T WANT YOUR OLD SPY-MASTER TO SEE RIGHT *THROUGH US*, WOULD WE?

WELL, THERE ARE A FEW JOBS IN VARIOUS STAGES OF PLANNING, AGENT CARVER...

...LET ME TAKE A *LOOK* AT THEM AND SEE WHICH ONE WOULD MAKE THE MOST *SUITABLE* MORSEL FOR LYNCH TO CHEW ON.

But that actually is my hope--that Lynch and Tao are spending so much time looking at each other...

...that I become invisible.

So, while I spend a few weeks setting up the big show--which is what it is, since the only people not ACTING will be the ones walking into a DEATHTRAP--

--I'm also mulling over MY OWN plan of action.

Because the way I see it, even after all I've been through, I'm still just a glorified PAWN at the mercy of two master gamesmen...

...and I've played enough chess to know that pawns rarely make it out alive.

And no matter how many promises both of these bastards have made me...

...no matter how much they've tried to make me feel important to them...

BIO-MORPH

...I can't stop seeing myself as CANNON-FODDER in their eyes. And I'm not about to let that fate sweep over me.

No, I've got to find myself a way OUT of this trap, and it's got to be a GOOD ONE.

The problem is, any way I look at it, I'm going to need HELP to pull this off...and there's hardly anyone left who I can trust.

With something like THIS, maybe there's NO ONE I can trust.

--WAIT, I DON'T WANT TO MISS THE ***NASTY*** PART.

I JUST STARTED, M. DON'T WORRY...

ALL RIGHT, SO WHERE ***WAS*** I?

IN HIGH SCHOOL.

RIGHT, OKAY, SO...

"...IN HIGH SCHOOL, CLAUDIA WAS THE GIRL ALL THE GAY BOYS SECRETLY ***CAME OUT*** TO."

--AND ***NO ONE*** KNOWS, NOT MY MOM. NO WAY ABOUT MY DAD, HE'D ***KILL*** ME.

"SHE WASN'T GAY HERSELF, BUT SHE HAD ALWAYS ENJOYED THE COMPANY OF FAGS, THE QUEENIE-ER THE BETTER, REALLY."

I WAS ALL ***SNAP!*** GET OUTTA MY ***FACE,*** BITCH, AND HE WAS ALL--

"THEY WERE FUNNIER THAN MOST OF THE GIRLS SHE KNEW, DIDN'T WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH HER, AND RARELY GOT JEALOUS WHEN SHE MADE OUT WITH SOME GUY AT A PARTY.

"AND SO HER EARLY HIGH SCHOOL NICKNAME WAS ***FAGHAG.***

"NOW ONE OF HER FRIENDS, ONE OF THE LESS QUEENIE ONES, WAS ALSO A BIT OF A SCIENCE GEEK, AND ONE DAY SHE ATTENDED A DEMONSTRATION WITH HIM.

"THIS KID WAS THE MOST PICKED-ON GUY EVER. NOT ONLY WAS HE A ***NERD,*** BUT HE WAS ALSO ***OPENLY*** GAY, IN A DAY WHERE THAT ***REALLY*** WASN'T ACCEPTED IN SCHOOL.

"SO, AT THE DEMONSTRATION, SOME JOCKS STARTED PUSHING HIM, AND ACCIDENTALLY SHOVED HIM RIGHT INTO THE BEAM OF THIS INTERSPATIAL PARTICLE ACCELERATOR, AND EVERYTHING WENT CRAZY.

"HER POOR FRIEND WAS *IRRADIATED* OR SOMETHING. SHE NEVER UNDERSTOOD EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED.

"BUT IN HIS DYING MOMENT, AS HE FLAILED FOR LIFE, HIS *TEETH* RIPPED RIGHT INTO HER NECK."

WAIT. YOU WERE *BITTEN* BY AN *RADIOACTIVE HOMO--?*

CAN I PLEASE TELL THE STORY *MY* WAY?

OH, YOU *GO,* GIRL...

"AND SUDDENLY, SHE FELT ENERGY RUNNING THROUGH HER, AND *ANGER.* AT ALL THE BASTARDS SHE'D SEEN DUMP ALL OVER HER FRIENDS FOR YEARS.

"WHO'D NOW KILLED ONE OF THEM.

"BEFORE SHE KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING, SHE'D KILLED HALF THE FOOTBALL TEAM...

...AND WAS FORCING THE OTHER HALF (ON THREAT OF DEATH) TO *DO* EACH OTHER ON THE FLOOR OF THE LAB.

"CLAUDIA LAUGHED WITH THE RUSH OF POWER AND THE SUDDEN FEAR EVERYONE AROUND HER WAS IMMOBILIZED WITH...

"...BUT JUST AS SUDDENLY AS IT CAME, SHE FELT THE POWER DRAIN OUT OF HER. THEN SHE LOST CONSCIOUSNESS.

"WHEN SHE WOKE UP, SHE WAS IN A LAB SOMEWHERE, STRAPPED TO A TABLE, AND A LOT OF MEN IN WHITE COATS WERE EXAMINING HER.

"SHE WAS TERRIFIED, BUT THEN SOMETHING IN THAT ROOM LEAPT OUT AT HER--THE ORDERLY IN THE CORNER WAS ***GAY***, SHE JUST ***KNEW IT*** SOMEHOW.

"AND WHEN THAT ORDERLY CAME NEAR HER, SHE REACHED OUT FOR HIM...TOUCHED HIM.

"AND SUDDENLY SHE FELT THE POWER RUSHING THROUGH HER AGAIN, AND SHE BROKE FREE OF HER BONDS.

"BUT THE POOR ORDERLY HAD BEEN SUCKED DRY, HIS LIFE ENERGY SOMEHOW CONVERTED TO WHATEVER POWER SHE WAS SURGING WITH.

"SOMEHOW THAT BITE FROM HER DYING FRIEND HAD TURNED HER INTO AN ENERGY VAMPIRE. BUT SHE COULD ONLY SUCK THE ENERGY FROM HOMOSEXUAL MEN...

...AND THE *TRAGEDY* WAS, ALL HER BEST FRIENDS WERE FAGS.

BWAH HA HA!

I REALLY LIKE THE PART WHERE YOU MAKE THE JOCKS FUCK EACH OTHER, FAGHAG.

SO, WAIT, YOU CAN ONLY GET ENERGY FROM GAY GUYS? THAT IS ***MESSED-UP.***

I ***KNOW...***

I watch Miss Misery laughing at her friend's story...

...watch her sneaking little glances at me. Almost embarrassed that she does...

...and my gut tells me to balance the equation.

Maybe what I've got planned is JUST fucked-up enough to bring her onboard.

Still, instead of explaining, it seemed smarter to just BRING HER ALONG. To throw her into the thick of this mess with me before I make her decide.

Like I said, I learned from the best.

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW RIGHT NOW IS THAT TAO ***KNOWS*** THESE MEN ARE DEAD.

NOW JUST TAKE THESE AND WATCH ACT TWO...

YOU LITTLE PRICK...WHAT ARE YOU ***INTO?***

SOMETHING ***BIG.*** WHAT DO YOU SEE?

THEY'VE LEFT ONE ***ALIVE,*** SOME KIND OF ***SHAPE-SHIFTER...***

"HE LOOKS CONFUSED AS HELL, AND LIKE HE'S ABOUT TO SHIT HIS PANTS."

"AND IT'S ABOUT TO GET WORSE."

"BASTARDS AREN'T EVEN TRAINING THEIR WEAPONS ON HIM, AND NOW THERE'S A ***CAR*** PULLING UP, ***GOVERNMENT*** CAR."

"THAT'S WHAT I'M ***TALKING ABOUT...*** WATCH THIS."

NOW NOW, MR. BARKER, I CAN ASSURE YOU, YOU ***WON'T*** BE NEEDING THAT GUN.

N--N-- I...UK.

THAT'S IT, DON'T FIGHT ME...

JUST TAKE THIS AND SMILE FOR THE CAMERAS.

WH-- WHAT'RE YOU ***DOING*** TO ME?

PUTTING YOU TO GOOD USE.

YOU'LL REGAIN ***CONTROL*** OVER YOURSELF SOON AFTER WE LEAVE, MR. BARKER.

I'D SUGGEST YOU ***RUN.***

HEY... HEY, THIS IS... ***FUCK...***

THAT WAS YOUR OLD ***BOSS***, THAT LYNCH BASTARD.

YES IT WAS, IN PRIME FORM.

HE JUST PAID OFF THE SHAPE-SHIFTER?

CERTAINLY WHAT IT'D ***LOOK LIKE*** TO A NEUTRAL OBSERVER, ISN'T IT?

AND TAO KNOWS ABOUT THIS?

HE HELPED SET IT UP.

SO, WHO'S FUCKING ***WHO?***

THAT ***IS*** THE QUESTION.

BLEEP-DEEDEEP

IT'S *TAO.* AM I WITH YOU?

DEFINITELY *NOT.*

YEAH?

UH HUNH. YEAH, I KNOW THE PLACE...ALL RIGHT, CONSIDER IT DONE.

WHAT?

YOU TELL ME.

HE JUST SENT YOU TO *TAKE CARE* OF THE SHAPE-SHIFTER. TOLD YOU HE'S A *TRAITOR.*

HE'S ON HIS WAY TO A *SAFE HOUSE* A MILE FROM HERE.

YOU *COMING,* OR DO YOU JUST WANT TO PULL MY STRINGS?

WELL, WHEN YOU PUT IT LIKE *THAT...*

HUNDRED THOU...JESUS FUCK A MORMON...THE HELL IS GOIN' ON?

GET IT TOGETHER, CARL...MAKE A FACE TO GET LOST IN THE CROWD...

FUCK!

GOD DAMN IT...PULL IT TOGETHER... C'MON...

NERVES TOO SHOT TO TRY AND HIDE BEHIND A NEW *FACE*, BARKER?

AH!

WAIT! WAIT! WAIT!

MISS MISERY? AW, GOD...WHY IS THIS *HAPPENING* TO ME?

THIS *ISN'T* WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, I SWEAR TO *FUCKING GOD*...

DO I *LOOK* LIKE I BELIEVE IN *GOD*?

DO I LOOK LIKE I *CARE* WHO YOU SWEAR TO? SWEAR TO ZEUS FOR ALL I CARE...

WAIT! BUT--*LOOK!* LISTEN...I DIDN'T HAVE *ANY-THING* TO DO WITH THAT SHIT. I DID WHAT I WAS *SENT* TO DO, BUT...BUT...

BUT BUT BUT... WAH WAH WAH...

I *SWEAR*...THIS ISN'T WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE... I WAS *SET UP*...

YEAH, YOU *WERE*, BARKER. BUT THAT'S THE WORLD YOU *LIVE IN*, ISN'T IT?

UNTIL *TODAY*, THAT IS.

SHOULD I PUT ONE INTO *YOUR* BRAIN, TOO? JUST TO SEE HOW LONG IT TAKES YOU TO HEAL AND GET BACK UP SO I CAN DO IT AGAIN...

...OR DO YOU WANT TO TELL ME EXACTLY WHAT KIND OF *GAME* YOU'RE TRYING TO *PLAY* HERE, HOLDEN?

So we dump Barker's body somewhere the cops will find it, and we take a walk.

And I tell her.

I tell her all the secrets that were supposed to be just between me and Lynch...

...the ones that were between me and Tao...

...and I tell her what I want to do.

Why I need her help.

ARE YOU FUCKING *KIDDING* ME?

NOT AT ALL.

THEN ARE YOU FUCKING *INSANE*?

PROBABLY, YEAH...BUT I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE THAT.

I MEAN, THINK ABOUT IT, GRETCHEN...YOU AND ME AGAINST THEM ALL. DOESN'T THAT SOUND FUCKED-UP?

JESUS...YOU'RE NOT TRYING TO BRING ME IN ON ALL THIS BECAUSE YOU TRUST ME, ARE YOU?

BECAUSE YOU'RE ALREADY ENOUGH TO--

NO, GRETCHEN. I MEAN, SORRY TO SAY, I DO TRUST YOU...BUT I'M BRINGING YOU INTO THIS BECAUSE I CAN'T DO IT ALONE.

AND I FIGURE DOUBLE-CROSSING TAO IS ABOUT AS BAD AS YOU CAN GET, RIGHT?

EVEN IF WE SUCCEED WE'D BE OUTCASTS FROM THE ENTIRE WORLD... BUT CHANCES ARE MORE LIKELY WE'LL BOTH END UP DEAD.

YOU FUCKER. YOU HAD TO KNOW I'D LIKE THOSE ODDS.

And yeah, I DID.

Too bad half of what I just told her was a lie.

Brubaker*Phillips*Strachan*Fletcher*Quinn*Dunbier